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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 HANOI 000895

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

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TAGS: [OVIP](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [VM](#)  
SUBJECT: Deputy Secretary Steinberg's September 27, 2009 Conversation  
with Vietnam Minister of Defense Phung Quang Thanh

HANOI 00000895 001.2 OF 004

CLASSIFIED BY: Michael Michalak, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

[1](#)1. (SBU) September 27, 2009; 9:30 a.m.; Ministry of Defense,  
Hanoi, Vietnam.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Participants:

U.S.

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The Deputy Secretary

Ambassador Michael Michalak, U.S. Embassy Hanoi

Joseph Donovan, Principal Deputy Assistance Secretary, EAP

Scot Marciel, Deputy Assistant Secretary, EAP

Rear Admiral Charles Leidig, Joint Chiefs of Staff

Ambassador Joseph DeTrani, Directorate of National Intelligence

Derek Mitchell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense

Clifford Reed, S/ES-O

Harry Kamian, Political Counselor, U.S. Embassy Hanoi

Colonel Patrick Reardon, Defense Attache, U.S. Embassy Hanoi

Pamela Park, Special Assistant to the Deputy Secretary

Jane Bocklage, Political Officer, U.S. Embassy Hanoi (notetaker)

VIETNAM

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Lieutenant General Phung Quang Thanh, Minister of Defense

Lieutenant General Pham Thanh Lan, Director, External Relations  
Department, Ministry of Defense

13. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting September 27, Vietnam's Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh assured the Deputy Secretary that while military cooperation with the United States remained a sensitive matter -- both internally and in its relations with China -- Vietnam's leadership had made a decision to move forward. Twice referring to United States as a "significant partner," Thanh affirmed that U.S. engagement contributed to regional peace and security and said that he looked forward to visiting Washington, perhaps by the "end of the year." He also reiterated an invitation for Secretary Gates to visit Hanoi and encouraged the United States to attend a meeting of the ASEAN defense ministers in 2010. The Deputy Secretary emphasized the importance of the bilateral defense relationship and encouraged Vietnam, in particular, to participate more actively in global peacekeeping. Thanh stressed that Vietnam was committed to peacekeeping, adding that Vietnam's leadership had instructed the MFA to identify missions suitable for Vietnamese participation. However, when specifically asked about Vietnam's participation in the 2010 Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) Capstone exercise in Cambodia, Thanh conceded that Vietnam was only prepared to send observers. The two sides exchanged views on challenges to regional security, including tensions in the South China Sea, agreed on the utility of IMET programs to provide English-language for Vietnamese soldiers, and said they would consider elevating the level of participation in the DOD-MOD Defense Policy Dialogue. Alluding to the September 21-22 shadowing of the USNS VICTORIOUS, the Deputy Secretary emphasized the need for open communication to avoid unfortunate incidents. END

HANOI 00000895 002.2 OF 004

SUMMARY.

A "Significant Partner"

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14. (SBU) Meeting September 27, the Deputy Secretary and Vietnam's Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh agreed that the bilateral defense relationship had progressed significantly. The Deputy Secretary emphasized that U.S. engagement in the region was not targeted at any particular country and served to increase the stability and prosperity of the region as a whole. Thanh emphasized that while military cooperation remained a sensitive matter -- both internally and in Vietnam's relations with China -- Vietnam's leadership had made a decision to move forward. In two separate points in the conversation, Thanh explicitly referred to the United States as a "significant partner" and affirmed that Vietnam wanted the United States to contribute actively to regional peace and security. Injecting a note of caution, Thanh stressed that Vietnam's relationship with the United States was not directed at any third party (a clear reference to China) and would be conducted with Vietnam's independence firmly in mind. Still, the tenor of Thanh's remarks was decidedly positive, including a favorable mention of the April fly-out of senior MOD officials to the U.S. aircraft carrier Stennis. Thanh said he looked forward to rescheduling his postponed trip to the United States, perhaps by the "end of the year" and repeated an invitation for Secretary Gates to visit Vietnam. He specifically extended an invitation for the Secretary to attend a meeting of ASEAN defense ministers in Hanoi next year. The Deputy Secretary noted that the Defense Secretary enjoyed his meeting with Thanh at the Shangri-La in May and offered to convey Thanh's invitation.

Challenges to Regional Security

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15. (SBU) DefMin Thanh shared Vietnam's perspective on regional security issues, noting that while Southeast Asia as a whole was stable, there remained a number of significant challenges: piracy in the Malacca Strait; terrorism in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand; and border disputes (e.g. between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple). In addition, domestic instability in neighboring countries like Thailand -- while an internal matter -- could cause instability in the region. (He encouraged the United States to work with Vietnam to help address these concerns when Vietnam takes over as ASEAN Chair in 2010.

South China Sea

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16. (SBU) Moving to the South China Sea, referred to in Vietnam as the "East Sea," Thanh emphasized that while Vietnam was committed to resolving disputes peacefully and in accord with the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it was also determined to "protect its territory." Thanh emphasized the importance of the area to international shipping and encouraged the United States to play an active role in maintaining stability. The Deputy Secretary reaffirmed that while the United States took no position on the competing legal/territorial claims, it encouraged the peaceful settlement of disputes, in accordance with international law.

USNS VICTORIOUS

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HANOI 00000895 003.2 OF 004

17. (C) The Deputy Secretary stressed that while the United States and Vietnam might have interpret UNCLOS differently as it applies to Exclusive Economic Zones, it was vitally important to resolve these issues through open communication and in a way that builds trust. Alluding to the September 21-22 shadowing and harassment of the U.S. Ocean Surveillance Ship VICTORIOUS (reftel), the Deputy Secretary underscored that recent misunderstandings highlighted the need for dialogue so as to prevent "unfortunate accidents" that might damage the overall relationship. Thanh declined to comment specifically on the incident, but agreed on the need for "guidelines to avoid disputes and build understanding."

Peacekeeping: Encouraging Words, but Still Observing

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18. (SBU) DefMin Thanh asserted that as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Vietnam had come to understand its responsibilities and was prepared to participate in international peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the United Nations. The government had instructed the MFA to develop a project for Vietnam to eventually participate in UN peacekeeping operations. From the MOD's perspective, Vietnam could participate in demining, military, medicine, and reconstruction. (Note: By government, it was unclear whether Thanh meant the Prime Minister or the Office of Government. End note.) Thanh added that Vietnam wanted to be responsive to UN requests and expressed his desire to "hear" from the United State on PKO issues. Thanh offered no timeline, however, and when asked specifically whether Vietnam was prepared to participate in the 2010 GPOI Capstone exercise in Cambodia, conceded that the MOD would only send observers.

## IMET and Ship Visits

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¶9. (SBU) DefMin Thanh expressed gratitude for IMET funding for English-language training and requested additional assistance, urging the United States to match or exceed the roughly one thousand soldiers already trained by the Australian government. He specifically asked the United States to assist Vietnam develop English-language labs for the military. Also, he suggested the United States send instructors to Vietnam to teach English to the military. Thanh said that Vietnam welcomed U.S. ship visits, noting that in addition to the once-a-year ship visit permitted under Vietnamese law, high-level MOD officials had participated in the Stennis fly-out and had allowed maintenance on a U.S. ship at a Vietnamese commercial facility. Thanh cited these as positive developments and said, that he hoped that the United States might one day welcome a Vietnamese ship visit, but Vietnam's navy did not presently have sufficient range. Finally, Thanh expressed hope the United States and Vietnam could increase information sharing. The Deputy Secretary welcomed Thanh's ideas and said he would convey them to OSD and PACOM.

Legacy Issues: Unexploded Ordnance, MIAs, Agent Orange

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¶10. (SBU) The Deputy Secretary thanked Thanh for his efforts to support the hydrographic survey ship HEEZEN in its mission to look for U.S. service members missing in action. Thanh, in response, expressed his personal appreciation for U.S. veterans and encouraged more of them to return and, when possible, to provide information on Vietnam's own missing in action. Turning to U.S.

HANOI 00000895 004.2 OF 004

assistance on the clearance of unexploded ordnance, Thanh stated that the MOD would prefer greater and more immediate assistance, channeled directly to the Vietnamese military rather than through NGOs. Thanh raised Agent Orange, but only briefly, encouraging the USG to do more to speed the pace of remediation. The Deputy Secretary reassured Thanh that the United States understood the sensitivity and importance of all of these issues and our interest in exploring deeper cooperation in these areas.

Dialogues and Exchanges

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¶11. (SBU) Underscoring the value of continued dialogue, Thanh requested that the U.S. Department of Defense-MOD Defense Policy Dialogue be conducted at a higher level, perhaps by the Deputy Minister of Defense. The Deputy Secretary and PDAS/D Mitchell welcomed the recommendation and said they would take it back to Washington. Thanh added that relations with U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) were excellent and could be developed even further. The Deputy Secretary, PDAS/D Mitchell and Rear Admiral Leidig expressed appreciation for the growing relationship between MOD and PACOM and welcomed its expansion. PDAS/D Mitchell added that OSD was also looking forward to a Washington visit by DefMin Thanh, coordinated with Secretary Gates' schedule. PDAS/D Mitchell thanked DefMin Thanh on behalf of Secretary Gates for the invitation to visit Vietnam and assured him that it would be conveyed to the Secretary.

¶12. (U) The Deputy Secretary cleared this cable.  
Palmer